

Think Outside THE ARENA

Why land conservation should be a priority for dressage riders everywhere

BY LISA MUNNIKSMA

ROOM TO ROAM: Thanks to land-conservation efforts spearheaded largely by equestrians, much of Unionville, PA, remains farmland and open to horse traffic



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In the area surrounding Mount Airy, MD, just west of Baltimore and north of Washington, DC, you'll find some open space—more than in other parts of this region, for sure—and a few historic farms. You'll also find traffic congestion, McMansion developments, and sprawling suburban shopping areas.

It's among the farms and open space that Steve and Suzanne Quarles have made their 250-acre Hanoverian breeding facility home; and it's because of the traffic, encroaching housing, and abundant suburban services that they've chosen to protect it. The Quarleses worked with Maryland Environmental Trust (MET)—of which Steve is a board member—to put their Some Day Soon Farm into a conservation easement. Like an increasing number of horse owners, they recognize the threat that land development is making to their equine interests, and they decided to take action.

"With the amount of development we've had in the last twenty years, in particular, we've sprawled pretty far out from our cities, and that's resulted in the loss of land and trails available to horse owners," says Tom Daniels, PhD, professor of city and regional planning and director of the Certificate in Land Preservation Program at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA. Land conservation is not only an issue for trail riders, endurance riders, foxhunters, and eventers—the equestrian disciplines that tend to come to mind when considering the need for large, continual open spaces.

"Sometimes people think they can manage three to five horses on very small acreage—even three to five acres, in some cases—so they don't look at conservation as an important issue; however, it is important that people look at the big picture. If they compete, they need to have access to competition venues.... They need to have other riders to compete against, so all those riders need to have land for their horses. The horses need to be fed, so there is [need for] more land. And in most cases, someone else has bred and trained these horses, so more land was involved at some stage," says Holley Groshok, acting executive director for Equine Land Conservation Resource, a national nonprofit organization headquartered in Lexington, KY, and dedicated to the issue of preserving land and promoting access to open space for equestrian use.

Don't own hundreds of acres, so you think you can't make a difference? Think again. Land conservation is a cause every USDF member can get behind. Here's how.

On the Farm

Some Day Soon Farm is an example of a land-conservation success story. The property was placed into a conservation



PRESERVATIONISTS: Steve and Suzanne Quarles and friends at their *Some Day Soon Farm*

easement, which is a deed restriction that protects the land from being developed for nonagricultural use. The easement is an agreement with a land trust that monitors and enforces the details of the contract.

“A conservation easement has a lot of advantages,” says Steve Quarles. “Typically, people can get the money back on the property, even considering that development rights have been lost.”

Without development rights, the assessed value of a property is reduced because a parcel’s highest value is usually appraised in relation to its worth as a building site. This reduction in value has financial advantages, including significantly reduced estate and income taxes as well as the potential for income generated from additional conservation opportunities.

Some might regard selling or donating development rights as giving up control of the property, but that’s not the case. “MET, like most trusts, has a standard easement, but you can always negotiate the terms of the easement,” Quarles explains. “The easement basically prevents residential development beyond the existing development,” though the owner can reserve the right to permit a limited number of additional dwellings and to further bolster the property’s agricultural income potential, such as by installing competition arenas and agritourism facilities.

Many farm owners “see their land as part of their portfolio. It’s an asset,” says Busy Kislig-Shires Byerly, executive director of the Gainesville-based Conservation Trust for Florida, a nonprofit land trust dedicated to farms, ranches, timberlands, natural areas, and wildlife corridors in that state. Yet “if we don’t preserve these pristine horse-farm

lands, we’re going to be raising our horses on sand.”

Beyond the tax and potential income benefits, there’s peace of mind. A conservation easement can be a good move from a business perspective as well as an investment in the future of the horse industry. “When you get past all of the economics, there’s a wonderful sense of security and happiness that the land you bought will stay this way for generations to come,” Quarles says.

The Process

Enrollment in an easement requires surveys and appraisals and, after the easement has been approved, an annual inspection to ensure you’re adhering to the agreed-on terms. There’s also work to be done with your family, which some people find is the hardest part of the process. Family dynamics and any underlying issues may get dredged up during the conversations about land use.

“You work with your family to come up with a goal for that property,” says Byerly, who was motivated to pursue a career in land conservation out of concern for the future of her family’s Alachua, FL, horse farm. “It’s a difficult thing to talk about: When Mom and Dad die, who will get the farm?”

Fortunately, land-conservation organizations have resources to guide you through the family discussions, the research, and the enrollment process, the latter of which can be complex, as well. Besides the family involvement and that of your local land trust, you’ll also need to speak with your financial planner, accountant or tax advisor, and law-



ENCROACHMENT: When the Devon (PA) Horse Show was established in 1896, it was “out in the country” on Philadelphia’s Main Line. Today the 27-acre show grounds (pictured during Dressage at Devon 2013) are surrounded by business and housing developments.

yer. There may be government programs that can assist in the conservation process, and some state and federal programs pay for (rather than accept donations of) easements. But “those programs are not as widely available now as they used to be,” Byerly says.

“I will tell you from experience that most lawyers have no idea about conservation law and options for land owners,” says land-conservation attorney and consultant Laurel Florio, JD, of Roswell, GA, highlighting the importance of working closely with the land trust and taking advantage of the many resources available through conservation organizations. (See “Conservation Preparation” on page 30.)

“Think about preserving your land with a conservation easement just as seriously as you would selling your property. It’s not a decision to be taken lightly,” Daniels says.

Throughout the process, keep your neighbors informed, too. It’s common that someone enrolls because a neighbor did so first, says Daniels. Plus, “When land preservation works best is where you have large, continuous blocks of land,” he points out.

Whether or not a conservation easement is a good option for your farm, conserving the natural resources on your land is a primary responsibility of responsible horsekeeping.

“Best management practices are an important conservation tool all horsemen should be aware of and implementing on their property [to maximize] the resiliency of the land and waters that service the facility,” ELCR’s Groshek says.

(For more on environmentally responsible horsekeeping, see “Greener Acres,” March 2013.)

Off the Farm

Land conservation doesn’t stop with land owners. What if your boarding farm or local show facility were sold to developers tomorrow? Non-land-owning riders need to be versed in zoning, planning, and conservation, too.

“Poorly planned, uncontrolled development—sprawl—population growth, and a citizenry that is increasingly unfamiliar with livestock are the greatest threats to equestrians and horse land owners today, continuing to put the equine experience out of reach of many families. As one might suspect, the risks greatly increase in areas with substantial pressures from development and urbanization around metropolitan areas,” Groshek says. “Unfortunately, our equine bases often surround metropolitan or urban areas.”

Susan Woods, a dressage professional, USEF “R” judge, and co-owner of Four Winds Farm in Ocala, FL, and her friend and neighbor Lynn Recio took on a comprehensive plan amendment in their Marion County community in 2007 and won. Almost 800 homes were slated to be built on a 400-acre parcel—a stark contrast to the zoning restrictions of one home per 10 acres in this area dominated by the horse industry. After a two-year fight, with some pro bono assistance from a lawyer and no legal training of their own, Woods and Recio got the Florida Department of Community Affairs approval reversed in favor of preserving the area’s tranquility, the horse owners’ ability to hack down the road and—most important, in Woods’ opinion—the underground springs that provide much-needed water to the area. ➔

Conservation Preparation

Find resources for promoting land conservation with these organizations:

American Farmland Trust: farmland.org, (202) 331-7300

AFT's Farmland Information Center: farmlandinfo.org, (413) 586-4593

Back Country Horsemen of America: backcountry-horse.com, (888) 893-5161

Conservation Trust for Florida: conserveflorida.org, (352) 376-4770

Equine Land Conservation Resource: elcr.org, (859) 455-8383

Land Trust Alliance (has list of all land-trust organizations in the US): landtrustalliance.org, (202) 638-4725

Maryland Environmental Trust: dnr.state.md.us/met, (877) 620-8367

US Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service: This government program offers the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program, Grasslands Reserve Program, Healthy Forests Reserve Program, and Wetlands Reserve Program. As of this writing, the new Farm Bill has not passed, and the FRPP and GRP benefits have expired. They could be reinstated with the instatement of a new Farm Bill. nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/easements

The Nature Conservancy: nature.org, (703) 841-5300.

"In the process, people learned about their water sources and the natural resources in the area," says Woods, who is also the founder and president of the Floridan Aquifer Legal Defense Organization. "Whether you're rich or you're poor, or you like horses or you don't care about them, the water matters.... It's really important that we make space for Mother Nature to do what she needs to do."

It may not be a 400-acre property that is in danger in your town—perhaps it's just a 10-acre boarding facility—but once that parcel is gone, so is that opportunity to grow the dressage community. Because so much of the active dressage community is centered around metropolitan areas, these farms are especially at risk because the land is so valuable to developers.

"The boarding facilities are the ones not making any money as a business, and they end up selling their farms, and the boarders have nowhere to go," says Groshek. "A lot of the boarders are the ones who end up suffering."

What You Can Do

Although you may not be able to prevent a farm owner from selling to a developer, you can work to restrict land-use planning and zoning to agricultural use, and you can help to educate farm owners about the financial benefits of conservation easements.

"Land trusts tend to work by word of mouth," says Quarles. "There's nobody better than a boarder to talk to a farm owner. [Farm owners] worry about how to keep their land going and don't know about easements that can bring them revenue."

Land-use planning and zoning are cornerstones for conservation, says Groshek: "Once they do a plan for a

community, it tells us where they're going to go in the next twenty years."

Staying on top of proposed development and zoning changes is not easy. "I'm guilty of this, too. I see the sign that says *Public Notice*, but I'm going by at thirty-five miles per hour and I don't read it," Florio admits.

These signs, plus notices in the local newspaper, are posted by law. They outline the proposed change to property use, the public comment period, and the date of the planning meeting where it will be discussed.

"You've got to get yourself to your local planning meeting. You've got to go and find out what's going on. You will not have the right to complain about it later," Florio says.

Go to the meeting equipped with statistics about the economic impact of the horse industry in your area and of the farms in jeopardy, in particular. While you might be emotionally invested in the cause because you love your horse, your boarding farm, and your sport, the zoning and planning commissions want to hear concrete evidence of the farm's financial importance to the community: the number of people employed and the amount of money infused into the local economy as a result of veterinary care, fencing, feed, and other expenses. "That's a lot stronger of an argument versus the emotional impact," Groshek says.

Even more important than getting involved yourself is for equestrians to wage a group effort. "We can have a measurable impact as a horse community by having a uniform voice and getting involved," Groshek says. Involvement in your USDF group-member organization (GMO), other local horse clubs, and state horse council provides relationships and networks needed to make a strong showing for land-use issues.

“USDF, like a growing number of breed and discipline organizations, [is an ELCR] Conservation Partner because they realize that land conservation is one of the most important issues facing the equine sport and industry. Most equine organizations do not have the resources to keep current on conservation issues relating to the equine community. By partnering with an organization like ELCR, organizations like USDF can ensure that their members have access to up-to-date information and tools regarding conservation issues and also a resource to turn to regarding specific issues in their community when the need arises,” Groshek continues.

It’s time for the horse community to unite, too, across disciplines. “We have to think of ourselves as a whole,” Groshek says. “Every time we lose access or land for horse people, it hurts all of us. Most often, the equine community does not react until the bulldozers are next door, and often by that time it is too late. Working together, horsemen can impact what happens in their local community if they stay abreast of the issues.”

On an individual level, consider volunteering for a land trust or land-conservation or environmental organization on the local, state, or national level. Serve on the board; help with public outreach; stuff envelopes for a fund-raising campaign. Make a donation to these groups, if you’re financially able.

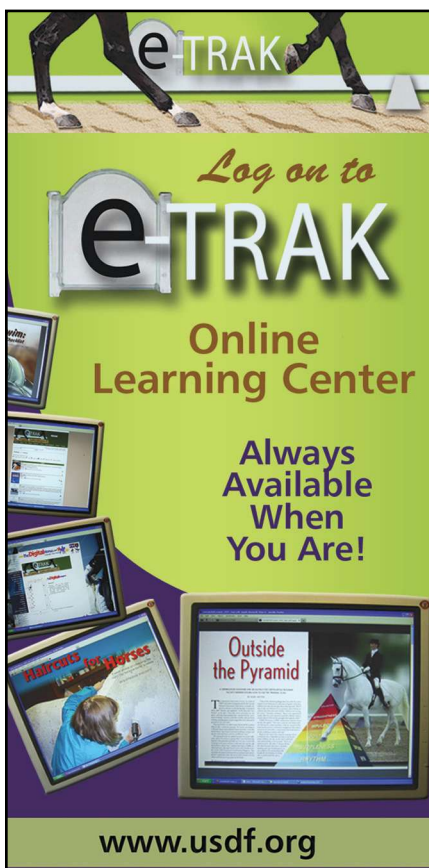
National action is as important as local action. Many equine facilities get their hay from other states. If you live in Florida but your hay comes from Kentucky, you need to be concerned about and support the people and organizations involved in land-conservation issues in Kentucky, as well.

Florio says that many equestrians are “oblivious” to the land-development threat. “It’s all about the big picture. What does my horse require, and where does it come from? What can we do to ensure the longevity of our sport?” ▲

Freelance writer Lisa Munniksma has been interested in open-space preservation since before she called herself a horse person. Follow her online as she learns about sustainable living, agriculture, and food systems around the world at freelancefarmerchick.com.

The loss of land for horse-related activities is the greatest threat to horse sport, industry, and recreation in the United States.

—David O’Connor, then president of the United States Equestrian Federation, at the 2008 Kentucky International Equine Summit



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